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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DHAKA 002087

SIPDIS

FOR SA A/S ROCCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/01/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KISL](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH SCENESETTER FOR A/S ROCCA

REF: A. 04 DHAKA 03768

[¶B.](#) DHAKA 01150
[¶C.](#) DHAKA 01802
[¶D.](#) DHAKA 01851
[¶E.](#) DHAKA 01924
[¶F.](#) DHAKA 01799
[¶G.](#) DHAKA 01742
[¶H.](#) DHAKA 02061
[¶I.](#) DHAKA 01807
[¶J.](#) DHAKA 01922

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.4 b, d.

[¶11.](#) (C) Summary. We should acknowledge the surprising run of positive BDG actions since February, but push for more, especially against political and extremist violence. It is important to reiterate our concerns about terrorism, extremist Islam, minority rights, and a transparent and credible electoral process. BNP confidence about its political prospects is growing. End Summary.

Growing BNP Confidence Because...

[¶12.](#) (C) Politically, the opposition remains divided and rudderless. The Awami League (AL) cannot find an issue to generate momentum, and leaders privately acknowledges that general strikes are ineffective and unpopular. Its new tack -- demanding electoral and caretaker reforms the BDG will never accept -- is wonky, a possible prelude to a boycott, and questioned even by some AL supporters who believe elections are the one political activity Bangladesh does well. The AL has the dubious view that BNP fears an election boycott. AL feelers to IOJ (so much for principled opposition to religion in politics) and Ershad's Jatiya party went nowhere, as did former president B. Chowdhury's new party. The BNP-Jamaat Islami alliance is devoid of mutual respect by grounded solidly in electoral expedience. The BNP's aversion to political risk minimizes its vulnerability to self-inflicted controversy. Last summer's introduction of the Rapid Action Battalion, and the subsequent birth of the "crossfire" phenomenon, has been the BDG's most popular of its few major initiatives in office.

[¶13.](#) (C) Economically, despite the obvious problems ranging from poverty to infrastructure, a generally positive macro-economic climate allows the BDG, and a pretty isolated PMO, to believe that the economy is progressing nicely. Foreign investment is up, inflation is manageable, and annual growth is a respectable five percent. There's been no perceptible pain from the end of textile quotas, though many expect it within the year as small, inefficient factories start to close. For Dhaka elites, life is getting better with new shopping centers, housing projects, and hospitals of a standard unseen in Bangladesh (ref A). The replacement in April of the retiring reformer who led the central bank with a civil servant without private sector experience reinforces BDG disinterest in new, potentially costly or disruptive reforms (ref B).

[¶14.](#) (C) Internationally, the BDG believes the geographical breadth of its political and commercial ties shields it from diplomatic pressure (ref C). Western political "meddling" annoys it but can shame the BDG into action if the outcome, like jailing human traffickers, does not jeopardize a core PMO interest. The optics and utility of a good relationship with the U.S. are important to the BDG, in part because it wants USG goodwill during times of trouble with India. The abortive Singapore conference suggested to the BDG that key Western and Asian countries will not challenge it on political matters.

Positive Developments Since Kibria's Murder

[¶15.](#) (C) In the aftermath of the shocking January 27 murder of AL leader Shah Kibria, there has been a surprising run of positive BDG actions:

A) The banning on February 23 of two extremist Islamist groups and the arrest of about a dozen militants charged with non-lethal bomb attacks on cultural events and two social development NGOs (ref D). Since then, there has been a

notable lull in extremist and high-profile political violence. DGFI's investigation of these groups began in mid-2004, but the timing of the crackdown was triggered by BDG embarrassment over the Bangladesh World Bank conference in Washington and the alarming "Bangla Bhai" article in the New York Times.

B) The arrest and charging of nine BNP persons for the murder of Shah Kibria. After a very slow start, Bangladesh police provided good cooperation during A/LEGATT's consultations on the case (ref E). We have concerns about the integrity of the confessions extracted under apparent duress from all the suspects except the ringleader, but many observers believe the suspects are in fact involved in the murder.

C) The sentencing to death of 22 mostly BNP-linked persons for the May 2004 murder of AL MP Ahsanullah Master (ref F).

D) Cabinet approval of all but one of the remaining UN counter-terrorism conventions; prompt parliamentary ratification is promised (ref G).

E) BDG drafting of legal changes to facilitate the investigation and prosecution of anti-terrorism cases (ref H).

F) A 62 percent drop in police "crossfire" deaths from January to March (ref I), though lately there are signs of a revival.

G) Virtual agreement on a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement.

H) Continued high prosecution and conviction rates for human traffickers.

I) The BDG ultimately decided against appointing the controversial and politically provocative Home Secretary, Omar Farooq, as Chief Election Commissioner, sending the pro-Jamaat retired civil servant instead to run the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission. The appointment of the CEC in May and the presentation of the BDG budget in June effectively kick off an 18-month campaign for the next general election.

The Flip Side

16. (C) There has also been a series of backwards steps and reminders of persisting core problems:

A) Despite assurances, the BDG has failed to capture the politically problematic "Bangla Bhai" or Abdur Rahman, his group's military commander. Officials suggest they fled to India. Critics blame lack of political will and note RAB's success in tracking down hundreds of major criminals in all parts of Bangladesh.

B) The BDG refuses to pursue "masterminds" (presumably senior BNP officials) in the Kibria and other AL attacks. Its obstruction of the August 21 attack on Hasina fuels speculation the BDG directs or protects the perpetrators.

C) The BDG, via police passivity and in some cases complicity, backtracked on protecting Ahmadiyas (ref J).

D) The BNP and the AL refuse to give each other an inch, with the AL calling the BNP "killers" and "traitors" to the principles of Independence, and the BNP asserting the AL is anti-Bangladesh and treasonably pro-India.

E) The Anti-Corruption Commission continues to flounder under bad leadership and BDG interference, with no hint it can evolve into a credible body. Instead, based on anecdotal evidence, corruption at the top may be getting worse in the run-up to the next election.

The Bilateral Balance

17. (C) Many of the positive BDG actions noted above were unexpected, but continued progress in key areas like extremist violence will be constrained by the BDG's unwillingness to acknowledge the extent of the problem or to attack it frontally. Oddly enough, PMO officials have already told us that the USG should be appreciative of the banning of the two Islamist groups and the BDG's "solving" of the Master and Kibria murders. The appreciation they have in mind is a PM Zia-POTUS meeting in New York or Washington.

18. (C) The BDG continues to be responsive to USG interventions, most recently by engineering bail for detained journalist Shoaib Chowdhury. However, we note with some concern that PM Zia, even in her capacity as defense minister, was "unavailable" to meet with Admiral Fallon. Two weeks later, she was similarly "unavailable" to inaugurate on Bangladesh TV USAID's new Bengali production of "Seasame Street," despite being offered anytime over a two-week span. It is unclear if her unavailability was a diplomatic snub.

Suggested Points

19. (C) For BDG:

-- Condolences on the Savar factory collapse. Happy that USAID-trained personnel and (training) equipment could lead the relief efforts. Admiral Fallon had hoped to discuss with PM other ways the U.S. military could build disaster response capabilities in Bangladesh.

-- Appreciate your cooperation with the FBI in the Kibria case, the conviction of Ahsanullah Master's killers, the arrest and charging of the Kibria suspects, and the banning/investigation of the two extremist groups.

-- Look forward to the transparent and credible prosecution of the Kibria and other suspects.

-- Also appreciate DGFI's briefings on its investigation of Bangla Bhai and colleagues. Capturing Bangla Bhai would send a strong rebuttal to the points in the January New York Times article.

-- Appreciate the relative lull in political violence since late February, which underscores the importance of solving such crimes and the application of vigorous law enforcement to avert a perceived climate of impunity for violence.

-- Concerned by the renewed attacks on Ahmadiyas and police facilitation of extremist demonstrators and the erection of provocative signboards at Ahmadiya mosques. We appreciate that after attacks against Ahmadiyas in late 2003, PM/you stated the BDG would not declare them non-Muslims. We also note that the ban on Ahmadiya publications is still under judicial review and mostly not enforced. What can you do to show your support for the rights of all Bangladeshis?

-- Appreciate the cabinet's approval of eight UN CT conventions, but the last one, on terrorism financing, is key. When do you expect Parliament to ratify the UN conventions?

-- Know that Ambassador Thomas has raised Leahy amendment concerns with you. This is serious. We noted the sharp drop in "crossfires" in February and March, but are concerned that since late April they appear to be on the rise.

-- Like you, we want free and fair elections. We know it is Bangladesh's right to organize its elections and make official appointments. Our focus is on how the entire political process operates, from political party actions to campaigning and voting. We believe the focus should be on the process, not individuals, and that democratic rights should be exercised and defended, not surrendered.

-- Disappointed by the Anti-Corruption Commission's very slow start.

10. (C) For Sheikh Hasina:

-- Saddened that you've lost full hearing in one year and partially in the other, hope continued medical treatment will help.

-- (Notional) Congratulations on your candidate's May 9 re-election as mayor of Chittagong. I know he's been very critical of the U.S. in the past, but I welcome his win as a vindication of Bangladeshi democracy.

-- I know you're contemplating proposed changes to the electoral and caretaker systems, particularly regarding the way key leaders during that period are appointed. We believe this issue is the sole domain of the Bangladeshi people.

-- We understand the importance of the next elections. We will watch closely how the entire political process operates in Bangladesh. We believe the focus should be on the process, not individuals, and that democratic rights should be exercised and defended, not surrendered.

-- In that context, I don't understand why the AL is boycotting the by-election created by Kibria's murder.

-- In December 2003, you made a statement of support for Ahmadiyas. Now that they are under renewed attack, are you considering making another statement?

CHAMMAS